

In September 1999 I gave an address to staff at the University of Wollongong that prompted some robust questioning and commentary. I wrote a day or so later to one of the organisers, as follows:

Driving home from Wollongong I kept turning over in my mind a statement that I might have made had I anticipated some of the questions I received. I said a bit of it at the beginning. It would have gone something like this:

‘We academics have constructed a view of the way universities are supposed to be that is born out of the experience of the 1960s and 1970s, when money was freely available, expansion was the dynamic, and promotions and appointments to senior posts were frequent. In any well-considered account of the university world either here or overseas the 1960s and 1970s have been exceptional. What we have now is very different, and we need to understand it. Above all, we need to recognise the need to manage better what we do, and not to demand that governments provide more money for it: those days have gone completely. Managing the postgraduate research business is one area where we ought to do better, and if we don’t then governments will. We have a research training system that is connected neither to Australia’s needs nor to the jobs available for those who successfully complete. Unfortunately, neither the ARC nor DETYA regards it as their task.’

Perhaps if I’d said something like that crisply it would have changed the questions I received. But in any case I’d be glad if you would pass on this note to those who should be identifiable in what follows.

The self-proclaimed postgraduate student, sitting by himself, mid-hall, on my left

You thought I was a wimp and expressed your deep disappointment in what I said. My rule in public debate is never to respond to *ad hominem* attacks, which is why I declined to reply. Your problem, from what I heard, is *hubris*, a not uncommon attitude among academics. It is all too easy for us to see ourselves and our work as central to modern life. That perspective was the text of Paul Rossiter’s remarks. From that perspective it is all so obvious: where would anyone be without all the discoveries we have made, or at least researchers of some kind at some time have made?

Almost no-one outside the academy thinks like this, and for what seem good reasons. All professions and occupations see their work as central to the existence of others, and they do not give pride of place to university people or university-generated ideas. If we press our point of view too hard we often attract anti-research responses: nuclear destruction, environmental damage — indeed, the very things that Paul satirised in his opening remarks. It is indeed the case, I think, that human beings rarely if ever manage to invent something or develop a process that does not have adverse as well as welcome consequences. We need to recognise this ourselves, and not portray what we do as always virtuous.

For much of the past twenty years I have had to argue the case for academics to Ministers, governments, politicians, businesses and the general public. The sort of rousing talk that you would like: the defence of truth, the free spirit of enquiry, 'the pursuit of scholarship for its own sake' (a wonderfully empty but much cherished piece of university rhetoric) — all of this cuts no ice at all outside the academy. It is seen as self-serving, and a defence of privilege, by people who are nearly always university graduates themselves. Why they have these attitudes is something that we should all think hard about. It would be easy for me to say the stuff you like, and I once did, but today it would serve no purpose other than cheering academics up. I have to find the money to keep my staff employed, and that sort of rhetoric gets in the way.

The man in the middle of the hall, red pullover and white hair

These remarks serve as a useful response to you. You say that I haven't changed my views in the last ten years. I think that's probably true, although the debate that we were having yesterday (on the research training problem) was one that only began earlier this year. My main statement in the general domain is probably 'How Research Came to Dominate Higher Education and What Ought to be Done About It', in the *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 17 No. 3, 1991. This article was prompted by ten years of considering requests by academics for research grants, and having to argue the case for them higher up (see above). The crucial moment was in the mid 1980s, when I suddenly realised that all the money we were spending was other people's money, and that the taxpayers, let alone other parts of government, had a perfect right to ask that what we did was in some real sense of value to them. I swung to that view then and have maintained it ever since.

There is a view that academics have a right to construct their own research agenda, and that money ought to be available to them to pursue that agenda, if they are any good (and most think they are that good). This is a form of special pleading, and at its worst, an argument for privilege. I don't think I ever shared that view, in part because I first learned to think about research money in the USA, where it was understood that one had to look for a sponsor from the beginning, and to learn to adapt one's research program to the interest of sponsors. There is currently plenty of money around for research, but it is sponsor's money, not our own. We need to recognise that there has been a profound shift from 'investigator-initiated' to 'sponsor-initiated' research in the last decade or so, and that the latter is set to continue.

The mathematician who approached me immediately after the session

I do recognise that there has been a great change in the culture in the last ten years, and in some ways I regard the universities of today as stronger and more confident than their predecessors in the 1980s. But, as the debate showed, there is still a reluctance to deal with our own problems — especially the 'undiscussibles'. I know that sometimes it all looks too hard (I feel that myself), but we do not have a decent method of managing our affairs as a system. This can even be seen within a university, where practices that are clearly less than

optimal are allowed because either it's always been like that, or if I make a fuss people will attack my area, or 'academic freedom' will be invoked. Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me that we need to keep going, making the university a better place. We now inhabit a university world where half the expenditure is supported from sources other than the Commonwealth core grant, and that greatly changes some of the ground-rules. I think that the need to refine and improve the university is never-ending.

the remark about 'research' in the pure maths areas

It would be so much better if we gave 'scholarship' or 'learning' (let alone 'teaching'!) as high a valuation as we gave to 'research'. I talked about that in the *Oxford Review* article. Put most simply, we over-value 'research' and under-value everything else that is good in what we do. It's time that we stopped.

You will see that I found the debate stimulating. I hope you can identify those I have described above and pass on my remarks to them. I'll send a copy of this letter to Paul.